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'Reagan's move called 'preemptive'

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WASHINGTON — Hints that Cuba and the Soviet Union were preparing to expand their military role in Nicaragua led President Reagan to increase the U.S. military presence in Central America, according to Pentagon and National Security Council officials.

"All our indications were that Cuba and the Soviet Union were preparing major military moves in Nicaragua, and so we had to move, too," one security council official said Thursday.

"Our move was a preemptive strike, so to speak," said a Pentagon official, who, along with other sources knowledgeable about the situation, agreed to talk on condition that he remain anonymous.

Administration officials said, however, there was no hard evidence that Cuba was mobilizing troops or warplanes to intervene in Central America.

And congressional critics suggested Thursday that U.S. intelligence analysts might have misread the evidence under pressure to supply proof for Reagan's hard-line stance on the region.

The Reagan administration surprised the U.S. public and angered critics Monday when it announced that it would dispatch 19 U.S. warships, including two aircraft carriers, and 3,000 to 4,000 ground troops to Central America for maneuvers that would last six months.

On Tuesday, Reagan described the deployments as "routine exercises." But privately, senior administration officials said they were meant to show support for U.S. allies in the region, step up U.S. pressures on Nicaragua's Sandinista rulers to moderate their Marxist stance, and prove to U.S. foes that Reagan could act decisively in Central America, despite congressional opposition to his policies.

Pentagon, State Department and security council officials interviewed this week said that although these factors explained what Reagan wanted the maneuvers to accomplish, they did not explain his decision to order the exercises.

In fact, they said, Reagan's key reason for deploying the U.S. forces was the U.S. perception that Cuba and the Soviet Union were planning a significant escalation of their military roles in Nicaragua.

State Department sources said U.S. ambassadors in Latin America had been instructed to tell "trusted" leaders in the region that Reagan had fresh intelligence data suggesting such an escalation.

The Cuban moves are to be described as amounting to a direct challenge to vital U.S. interests and national security, said the sources, who saw the cables sent to the American diplomats.

[On Thursday, Cuban President Fidel Castro suggested to reporters that he would be willing to pull Cuban military advisers out of Nicaragua and stop sending arms to that country if Washington did the same throughout Central America. On Friday, Reagan indicated he could accept such an agreement.

["If he is really serious about this, I think it's fine," Reagan said in an interview. "I think that I am willing to give him the benefit of the doubt in any negotiations."]

Security council and Pentagon officials said hints of Cuban and Soviet buildups in Central America began flowing into U.S. intelligence agencies 10 to 15 weeks ago.

Officials said alarm bells began ringing at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., in May, when photographs snapped by an SR-71, a high-flying spy aircraft, showed about 400 Cuban marines practicing "sophisticated amphibious landings" on beaches near the Cuban port of Mariel, 25 miles west of Havana.

The CIA's chief aerial-photography analyst, John Hughes, concluded that the Cubans were practicing an invasion of a foreign country, not a defense of their own beaches, the officials said.

Administration officials said they believed the Cubans might have been practicing for landings in Nicaragua, and perhaps even Honduras, a staunch U.S. ally.

At about this same time, the officials said, Hughes reported that four Soviet merchant ships had been photographed unloading military equipment at Nicaragua's Pacific port of Corinto.

The administration was further "jolted," the officials said, when the National Intelligence Daily — a CIA journal distributed to senior policy makers — reported on June 1 that Cuban army Gen. Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez had been in Nicaragua since early May.

The report said Ochoa had been instrumental in negotiating, organizing and leading the deployment of Cuban troops to Angola in 1976 and to Ethiopia in 1977.

Officials who read the CIA journal said that in July it noted that 1,200 Cuban military advisers had arrived in Nicaragua in recent months, raising the total of Cuban civilian and security advisers there to about 5,500.

Finally, said one security council official, U.S. diplomats around the world noticed in recent weeks that their Cuban counterparts were "probing" to assess how Reagan would react should Havana send troops or Soviet-made MiG warplanes to Managua.

While all this was going on, U.S. intelligence agencies were reporting an ongoing expansion of the Soviet military role in Cuba and Nicaragua.

Undersecretary of Defense Fred Ikle advised the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March that Moscow had shipped 63,000 tons of arms to Cuba in 1981 and 68,000 tons in 1982 — the highest yearly totals since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

Ikle also said that the number of Soviet military advisers in Cuba had increased by 20 percent in 1982, up to 2,500. In addition, he said the Soviets had 6,000 to 8,000 civilian advisers and a 1,700-member combat brigade in Cuba.

By last week, the Pentagon had revised upward the number of Soviet civilian advisers in Cuba to 8,500 to 10,500. The Pentagon also said that in the first six months of 1983, approximately 20,000 metric tons of military equipment was shipped from Moscow to Cuba.